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ABSTRACT

This manual provides teachers and administrators with information on Asian culture, people, and customs, to aid in the teaching of English as a second language to Asian students. The guide focuses on those facets on Asian culture relevant to the immediate life of the Asian ESL student. The following issues are discussed: (1) names; (2) birthdates; (3) family structure; (4) use of "yes" or "yah"; (5) shyness and smiling; (6) etiquette; (7) humbleness; (8) respect, politeness and restraint; (9) religion; (10) attitudes and behavior in the classroom; (11) speech habits; (12) eating habits; (13) time concepts; (14) superstition and symbolism; (15) color perception; (16) culture shock; and (17) historical influences. (APM)

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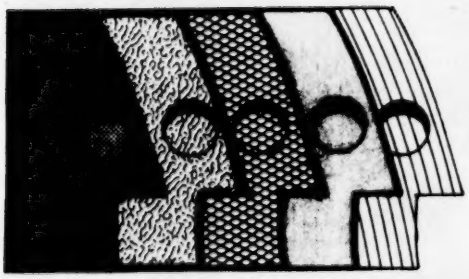
Bilingual Education Resource Series

CULTURAL FACTORS

A Guide to Understanding

ASIAN ESL Students



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CULTURAL FACTORS

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING ASIAN ESL STUDENTS

Reprinted by permission of Sue Tebeau, ESL Specialist, Mirror Lake Elementary School, Federal Way, Washington.

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Office of Bilingual Education

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PREFACE

Cultural heritage is an intimate, partly intangible aspect of every human being. Culture has its effects on the way each of us reacts and behaves. Volumes have been written on the cultural differences of an entire race, sub-culture, class and caste. It is an entire course of study in itself and consequently every detail cannot be covered here.

This booklet is designed to briefly touch on cultural aspects that may be apparent in the academic setting or that may have bearing upon the school personnel-student relationship. Hopefully, it will help in making you aware that there may be deeper significance behind a particular action or reaction.

I am pleased to make this copy of "Cultural Factors - A Guide to Understanding Asian ESL Students" available to you. This year at Mirror Lake, we have been dealing with students from this area of the world for the past 2½ years so, perhaps, some of the insights gained here may be of value to you.

If, after perusing this booklet, you have additional questions, please feel free to call me at 839-4600 and I will be happy to share with you any additional information I may have. One copy should remain in the faculty room and one is for whichever department is handling or will handle the E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) students.

Sue Tebeau

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INTRODUCTION

There is always a potential for misunderstandings between people of different heritages. There are certain cultural realities that are shared by Asians; concepts of humility, or "face" (honor and dignity), of reverence for age, and of ettiquette (good form). These are generalizations about Asians as a whole and are compiled here in order to assist non-Asian teachers in their communication with Asian students. It must be remembered, however, that each student is an individual with unique motivations and reactions, and should not be expected to fit automatically into a stereotype.

An attempt has been made here to focus on those facets of Asian culture touching upon the immediate life of the Asian ESL student . . . his school and his every day world . . . that might cause problems for him or his teacher.

NAMES: Southeast Asia

The Asian tends to be quite conscious of status and position. This, compounded by the extreme concern with good form, results in highly stylized ways of addressing one another. Other than with intimate acquaintances, Asians call each other by their titles instead of by first names.

In addressing someone, the family name is not used due to respect for the person addressed and for his ancestors. In conversation, names are rarely used to address a person, this is considered impolite. A personal pronoun or polite term is used instead, (Little Sister, Oldest Uncle, etc.). Many of the Asian languages have special vocabulary and grammatical features for honorific usages, (Honored Teacher, Wise Doctor, etc.).

The Vietnamese usually have three names. The surname or family name is written first and the given or chosen names, last. This is the opposite of the American system.

Family Name Surname		Middle Name	Chosen or Given Name
Nguyen	(male)	Thi	Hao
Dang	(female)	Diem	Xuan

While the American male adult would be known formally as Mr. Smith and informally as John, his Vietnamese counterpart would be known formally and informally by his given name, Hao or Mr. Hao. The Vietnamese female is also known by her given name, Xuan or Miss Xuan. If she is married (to Hao Nguyen) she can be known formally as either Mrs. Xuan (her given name) or Mrs. Hao (her husband's given name). Informally, she is always Xuan. The married woman keeps her own family name, so Xuan, even though married to Hao Thi Nguyen, will still be Xuan Diem Dang.

In an effort to "Americanize," many Vietnamese adults have changed their traditional order of names on written forms. This has led to further confusion. It is important to question thoroughly about the proper way to address your students. (They will always answer in the affirmative to please you.)

Cambodians, like Vietnamese, traditionally write their family names before their given names and are called by their given names.

Laotians traditionally write their names as we do with the given name first and the family name last, but they do follow the Indochinese custom of being addressed by the given names.

NAMES: Koreans

Koreans put their family name first before the given name, both in written form and in addressing someone orally. They believe the reference to the ancient family lines is honoring the family history and that the given names are of lesser importance.

NAMES: Laotians

In Laos, the family name is not particularly important. Traditionally, the names are descriptive, referring to things in everyday life. There is a practice of changing names at will to incorporate status, honor, titles; to confuse evil spirits; or to indicate a new stage of the individual's life cycle.

Lao names are usually poly-syllabic.

NAMES: Hmong

Hmong society does not possess surnames. Consequently, refugees have usually adopted their clan names for their

last names. As there are only about twenty clans, this accounts for the small amount of last names among the Hmongs.

It is customary for honorary and diminuative titles to be incorporated into a person's given name. The Hmongs also have an extremely complicated system of kinship terms of address. Kinship names are extended to all members of each generation. A generation is determined by actual lineage not age.

NAMES

It is strongly recommended not to "Americanize" an Asian student's name. A given name is one of our most personal possessions and to arbitrarily change it can be a degrading experience. If the student wants to be called by an American name, he may be called the name of his choice in the classroom. All records or correspondence home should contain only the official name.

BIRTHDATES

In many Asian cultures a new born baby is considered one year old at birth. If the family adheres to the lunar calendar tradition, the baby may have his second birthday only a few months after he is born. It is very possible that your student may not be the "American" age that his records state. Although you may be unable to remedy this situation, it is important to keep this factor in mind when considering your expectations for the student.

FAMILY

The traditional family unit of the Asian includes living and dead members as well as members as yet not

born. This is the ultimate concept of "extended family." Older people with their accumulation of a life time of experience are considered the wisest members of the society. If there is a grandparent living in the home, this is most likely the adult you will be dealing with.

The Asians' respect for age and their strong ancestral ties is reflected in their family, social, and business behavior patterns. This concept carries over into their concept of time. They are relatively slow in acting or reacting because they feel that time gives a person a chance to reflect and to take thoughtful action.

USING YES OR YAH

"Yah" is used as we would "uh-huh," a meaningless device to punctuate the silence. Yes, as spoken by an Asian, does not always mean that he agrees or that he understands. It is simply a means of showing respect for the person speaking by letting the speaker know that he is listening.

A Vietnamese student will always, whether he agrees or disagrees, respond starting with yes or yah. It in no way reflects upon the question. In order to make sure that a student understands a direction, try to have him do an example if possible.

SHYNESS, SMILING

Shyness in the Asian student would be more accurately described as a reserved attitude toward strangers or toward a person one does not know well. It is a polite attitude used to show respect to elders or superiors. Children are brought up to accept the opinions of their elders. In a social situation they seldom disagree since it would be very impolite for the speaker to lose face if it turns out his statement is erroneous.

Giggling or smiling will be used by the Asian student in almost any situation. If it seems inappropriate, it could be a signal that the student is embarrassed by the directness of the question, or that he did not understand what you were saying. He will not, most probably, ask you to repeat.

The enigmatic smile is a polite means to screen or hide confusion, ignorance, fear, contrition, shyness, or anger. It in no way reflects any rudeness to you.

ETIQUETTE

There are so many situations that could fit into this category it is impossible to discuss them all here. The few listed are only to let you be aware that cultural differences are very meaningful and will influence the Asian student's behavior.

Asians have been taught to use both hands in handing an item to someone or in receiving one, showing respect for the item and the giver. They therefore tend to interpret the American casual way of handling objects as being somewhat rude, a lack of caring.

The Asians feel that an apologetic look is sufficient when they accidently bump into someone or move in front of another person. Do not expect them to make an oral apology.

For some Asians, a verbal "thank you" will suffice for the moment when a favor or gift is given. They will open a present later as they may appear too eager or greedy by opening it in front of others.

HUMBLENESS

The Asians, with their strong sense of humbleness, feel uncomfortable accepting compliments. They tend to reject compliments, sincerely feeling unworthy. They seldom mention their talents or their abilities or

they may even give a very poor assessment of themselves. It is also impolite to "show off" one's knowledge spontaneously, so do not expect them to initiate responses.

RESPECT, POLITNESS AND RESTRAINT

The Asians' attitudes of respect for others, coupled with their concern for form, often results in their being overly generous. Gift giving is often beyond their means. Most Asians will not open a gift until the donor has left. This is because he does not want to appear too eager and also does not want to embarrass the giver by opening it in front of him. (In case it is as the giver said, "Just a little something.")

Public display of emotion is almost always considered in bad taste. It is not uncommon for boys or men to walk hand-in-hand. This is an ordinary mark of friendship, but dating as we know it in America, is very rare. Asians feel that displays of affection should be confined to the privacy of the home, not before guests.

Raising the voice, shouting or gesturing wildly are most impolite. And it is considered extremely impolite to look or stare into a superior's eyes while speaking to him. They are very uncomfortable with our usage of eye contact.

It is not unusual for Asians to ask direct, seemingly personal questions, especially about money matters. It simply expresses polite interest in your good fortunes. Favors are asked through hinting and indirection rather than by making an outright request. They do not want to put you on the spot, but to give you an easy means of refusal.

RELIGION

Buddhism dominates the mainland of Southeast Asia. In the Mahayana form, practiced in Viet Nam, Buddhas (Enlightened Ones) are objects of worship and meditation. The Theravada form entails more personal involvement and considers the original Buddha (Guatama) as a teacher. This form prevails in Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Buddhism coexists with other beliefs without conflict or interference. A Vietnamese, for example, finds nothing inconsistent in being Confucianist and Buddhist at the same time and Confucianism underlies the social and religious structure of Viet Nam.

An astrological form of Taoism has also spread throughout many parts of S.E. Asia, and Roman Catholicism is somewhat followed as well as Cao Daism, a synthesis of Confucism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Catholicism. A variation of Buddhism, Hoa Hoa, is also practiced. In Cambodia, Brahnamism is an added dimension.

Animism, an ancient belief that spirits live in most natural objects, is followed by many highland tribes. In some tribes, animism and ancestor worship are practiced along with formal religions. In Laos, Neah Ta, a belief in spirits who share the world with men is fairly extensive.

In Japan, religion plays an important role in all phases of Japanese life. The fine arts, social institutions, thought and life styles are influenced by Buddhism and the native religion of Shintoism is also very influential with its nationalistic and ritualistic characteristics.

In Korea, the two most common religions are Buddhism and Shamanism. About six percent of the population is Christian, more than any other Asian country except for the Philippines, where Catholicism prevails.

Most Chinese, except in mainland China where the Communists have outlawed religion, follow a combination of beliefs of the three great Asian religions--Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Much of the peoples' philosophy of life comes from the writings of Confucius and Lao-tse. The latter forms the basis of Taoism and includes much superstition and magic, while Confucianism teaches family loyalty, ancestor worship, and obedience to the laws of society.

Asian holidays have great significance, usually of a religious nature, and there may be occasions when your students will stay home from school to observe the rites involved in the celebrations.

THE CLASSROOM

Most Asian children are used to a passive method of learning. They learn by listening, watching and imitating rather than by actively doing things and discovering things for themselves. A student may display reluctance or even discomfort about the way lessons are presented in the American classroom. Competition is strong, but it is very frustrating to be non-verbal in a verbal environment. The Asian student expects the teacher to initiate all activities. He will feel uncomfortable in expressing a point of view, because it may differ from that of the teacher. Girls will be even more shy than boys.

The Asian student's attitude towards his teacher has always been one of great respect. His reluctance to ask questions in class, much less to speak out, may stem from his feelings of shyness, fear, or self-consciousness in the presence of his teacher. To risk making a mistake and "lose face" before his teacher is a frightening thought.

The traditional classroom in Asia requires the

teacher at the front of the room, lecturing. When the teacher asks a question, it is directed to a specific student to answer rather than the entire class. Students seldom volunteer because of a reluctance on the student's part to appear to be "showing off."

A student never used the teacher's name, but instead says, "Teacher Smith" or just "Teacher." This is the honorific title used in Asia and means no disrespect. A teacher is usually highly revered and treated with great courtesy.

Traditionally educated Asians equate the printed page with learning. They are thus visually-oriented and appear to need the reinforcement of reading and writing exercises, but implied answers are virtually impossible for them.

The audio-lingual method of learning, with its mimicry and repetitious features, can make an Asian student uncomfortable. Older children in a class focusing an oral practice may particularly feel that it is too childish an activity.

Some students at first seeing the lively atmosphere in their American classroom and the apparent lack of respect of their classmates for the teacher may in turn lose respect for the teacher. Usually this is temporary as the student learns the new ways and expectations. (See the section on Cultural Shock.)

Notes to the home, if they are not translated into the native language, may have dire effects. In Asia, contact from the school means only a bad report. Beatings have resulted from this misunderstanding, even when the report has been good or simply a request for information. Asian parents will tend to ignore conference dates as they feel that the school has full authority over the student while he is there. Also, they are sometimes too shy or embarrassed over their own poor English abilities to attend.

Traditionally, mixing of the sexes is avoided as much as possible. In mixed classes, girls would have the seats in the front rows, never sharing the row or bench with the boys. Friendships between the sexes would be formal and reserved. Be careful in assigning seat and work partners.

Sex education usually rests with the parents. The reluctance about this subject probably stems from the Confucian influence. There is a very reserved attitude about the exposure of the human body or direct reference to any part of the body hidden under the clothes. This type of upbringing will cause difficulties in gym and health classes.

SPEAKING

Many Asians have the tendency to be noncommital in their responses when asked a direct question. This may make them appear evasive, but they are only going to great lengths to avoid offending or embarrassing others. They will beat around the bush until they are sure that they can come up with a response that will be well received.

Their concept of "face" applies not only to their own sense of honor and dignity, but extends to the "face" of others, as well.

This attitude of respect for others carries over into linguistic features. In answering questions, the Asians' concern is not so much for the answer to the question itself, but rather for whether or not he can find a way to agree with the inquirer. This practice can result in linguistic chaos. Teacher: Didn't you bring your book today? Student: Yes. (Meaning, Yes, you're right. I didn't bring it.)

It would be better to ask, "Is your book here?" or "Is your book at home?"

Asians are extremely unwilling to discuss or talk

about unpleasant topics. They feel it will bring even more unfavorable occurances.

EATING

Asians tend to turn down food or drink when it is first offered. They are reluctant to appear greedy by accepting the first or even the second time around.

To Asians who are accustomed to eating with just a pair of chopsticks, the possibility of selecting the wrong piece of silverware is a frightening situation. Often, they don't know the proper way to eat certain foods because they do not know what the foods are.

The Asian custom of loud sipping and smacking of the lips may be offensive to Americans, but the Asians are simply showing their enjoyment of the food. On the other hand, the Asians feel that the "finger licking" of the Americans is very poor manners.

TIME CONCEPT

Asians place a different value on time. They subordinate time to other considerations. Tardiness is viewed with less seriousness than by Americans. It is not uncommon or impolite to be early, late or not to show up at all for appointments. As noted earlier, the more time given to considerations, the wiser will be the decision.

SUPERSTITION AND SYMBOLISM

As in all cultures, superstitions handed down through the generations play an important role in forming the attitudes and direct the actions of the Asian. There are too many to list here and those cited are only to make the teacher aware of the many ways a student's learning can be effected.

Most Asians are reluctant to talk about unpleasant topics generally. They are particularly sensitive about discussing death, illness, or accidents. This is even more strongly felt when it is a festive day or holiday in their native culture.

Most Asians do not like black. Wearing a black dress or suit may cause the Asian student to think you are in mourning. They do not enjoy art projects using black construction paper. A dark and gloomy day may cause an Asian child to become withdrawn and nervous. Many Asian children are afraid of the dark and more often than not, believe in ghosts.

Other colors play a great part in Asian cultures. Importantly, there are opposing beliefs across Asian nations. For instance, white is symbolic of paleness, a concept for death in China, but the Koreans favor white and associate it with purity, cleanliness and honesty.

In Asian cultures there is great and significant meaning placed on numbers. For example, the number four is called shi in Japanese, a word which also means death. Consequently a Japanese will avoid words that may contain the word shi in them. In English, the Japanese student may have trouble with our word she.

A Swastika in Asian cultures does not have the meaning which we attach to it. It is instead a religious symbol often worn as a token of blessings or good luck.

COLORS

Besides the symbolism and superstitions attached to colors, it is important to realize, for instance, that in Vietnam there are only six basic colors. To express other shades an object in nature is used to qualify the main basic colors. For example, xanh is either blue or green. To specify, a Vietnamese would say xanh plus the word for sky to designate blue and

xanh and the word for leaf to express green.

CULTURAL SHOCK

Sometimes a student is so overwhelmed by the differences he is experiencing that he is overtaken by problems that can be physical, mental or a combination of both. This is "cultural shock." So many powerful stimuli on the senses can cause severe physical ailments or depression, fear and possibly anger with which the student feels he cannot cope. A student may react in several ways, by becoming withdrawn and morose or by over reacting and becoming an actual behavioral problem. This is so foreign from his native upbringing that any misbehavior should be interpreted by you as a symptom of cultural shock. American type punishment can make it worse. There are interpretors available to help you when problems of this type arise.

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos

China's historical influence was powerful in Tibet and Viet Nam, but it was rather minimal in Laos and Cambodia. The marked cultural influence in these countries was exerted by India. In more recent history these countries have had much political and military turmoil with Japan and France having a big part during the World War II years.

Korea

The Korean people are Tungusic with some Mongol and Chinese mixture. There has been little contact with

outside ethnic groups making the population homogeneous in nature. The Korean language is very phonetic. Many adults also speak Japanese due to that country's occupation from 1910-1945 with English fast becoming an important second language.

People's Republic of China

Mainland China is primarily populated by the Han Chinese. The remaining 6% of the population is made up of non-Chinese groups, including Tibetan, Uighurs and Muslims. The national language is based on the Peking dialect of Mandarin. The non-Chinese groups speak their own languages.

The Republic of China

Also known as Taiwan or Formosa, the Republic of Chinas is made up of Chinese mainlanders who have immigrated over the last 300 years for a variety of reasons. Nearly every Chinese dialect is spoken in Taiwan although the official dialect is Mandarin. Many adults also speak Japanese as a result of Japan's earlier occupation.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a British Crown Colony made up mostly of Cantonese. Hong Kong has been greatly sophisticated by trade and many of the Chinese living there speak British English as well as Cantonese Chinese.

Japan

Japan's earliest influence was from Korea and China which introduced the Buddhist religion, a written language, and Chinese arts and crafts. Since then, Japan

has maintained its own control and developed its own culture which is quite distinct.

The Philippines

The Filipinos are Asian people with an Indonesian-Malaysian background. Spanish and American rule in the more recent past has had varying degrees of influence of the language, culture and religion.

There are eight major languages spoken, but Pilipino, based on Tagalog, is the official language and is used in most of the school system.

The Filipinos have kept most of their traditions and values. They value the family unit which often extends beyond the immediate family. Reciprocal obligations between members of the family circle are extensive and exacting.

CONCLUSION

This is only a small insight into cultural awareness. Most of the examples given here are to be considered as generalities only. There may be great differences depending on the background of each family. Each Asian country is vastly different from the others with only small portions of overlap between them. Please do not use this booklet as giving you hard and fast rules to follow, but use it only as a guide towards understanding your Asian ESL student.

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